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AUTHOR Merchant, Frank
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ABSTRACT

The standard of mechanical literacy of any publication should be very high, both for one's own information and for education in and outside classrooms. On this count, too many smalltime local papers are good only for "negative teaching" of socially accepted language. The influence of any newspaper on the language depends upon how much of it is read by how many subscribers. The paper's linguistic effect depends on what has to be studied intensively in order to be realized: its "stylistics" range from punctuation use through syntax, choice of words, spelling, and the resulting from all these and from its semantics. Punctuation rules are granted by those "new grammarians" who insist on the vocal-descriptive determination of usage, since it reflects the stress, juncture, even pitch of speech. Newspapers may very well be useful as elementary readers, in that they discuss the world which surrounds the student in the vocabulary that he is encountering. However, it is necessary to understand the aims of newspapers as well as their preparation before using them as teaching tools. (LL)

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Frank Merchant
Union College in Ky.

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Newspapers: Handle with Care

(Focus Group consultant's introduction: "Mass Media's Influence on the Language")

If Charles Carpenter Fries had examined metropolitan newspapers instead of letters about veterans' problems, as he attempted to describe an orally-based grammar, his "descriptive" textbook of 1940 would have had to determine that current American English was nearly as "prescriptive" as his own. In spite of the incursions which Fries and, strangely, more recondite theorists of permissive 'English as she is spoke' have made into teacher training and school manuals since World War II, and even with a widely-attested decline in expressive skill among young reporters since then, any reading of the great dailies and their wire services or listening to the network radio and television news and documentary-special feature programs, which are prepared by the same modus operandi and in the same tradition, will show that copy desks maintain a lively, prescriptive standard of what college textbooks have been terming "informal written--spoken informal." This avoids the ponderous insubstantiality of "formal" most of the in-group pretentions of "jargon" and both "slang" and colloquialisms," except as a kind of seasoning for wit.

Had Professor Fries searched for his "descriptions" in country weeklies, he would have found in many of them much more than proof of the obsolescence of schoolmarmish rules. Here--in, say, the outback of the Dakotas or Arkansas or Alabama or Kentucky, proofreading may be disregarded and solecisms of either pronunciation or usage are unrecognized, in all innocence. And this is more than following examples of popular speech; it leads to a carelessness and a variation of use, even of "mistakes," which would confound those seeking

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to find any regularity and basis for a local "dialect."

That dailies and news services--including the radio-TV editorial desks which write and rewrite their copy--draw their materials from the speech of active life is as apparent as that they clarify that speech according to writing "strategies" which are inculcated, pragmatically stylistic choices. Some of the habitual decisions may be accused of "snobbishness," since they are made with an eye toward rhetorical, social effectiveness. But a prescription which turns out to be blindly Latinate in wordiness or awkwardness will not be insisted upon, even though the copydesk's tradition and authority remember a grammar like Curme's, an editing like Maginn's or Ambrose Bierce's or H. L. Mencken's--or of that Nestor journalistic writers, "Little Book" Strunk.

Yet, odd and unfortunate usages, distinguishable from typographical errors, do bob up in the linotype slugs which are still the column-lines of our large city dailies. There is some reason to believe that introduction of non-typemetal-casting printers has slightly increased the mechanical literacy of some of the smalltown biweeklies or weeklies and the county weeklies; at least, the grammar and spelling that now appears in them can be taken as intentional. Unintentional confusions still infest the hastily-composed mail editions of the large papers which inform a whole area, or all of one or more states, every day. The worst of these is, perhaps, the misplaced slug or slugs and a resulting confusion of lines locked into forms in wrong order and so cast on the plates. However, skill in newspaper reading, which results very largely from understanding how and of what elements a paper is put together, gives a reader sophistication in making realignments and transpositions, as well as adjusting one's eye for the more common metatheses and ellipses of the speedy linotyper's fingers. The standard of mechanical literacy of any

publication should be very high, both for one's own information and for education in and outside classrooms.

On this count, too many smalltime local papers are good only for "negative teaching" of socially accepted language. They are usually scorned in their own communities, but I'll wager that their publishers have influence enough to make trouble for any teacher who tries to exercise the academic freedom of using them for classroom exercises in rewriting.

The supposedly more professional large papers do need to be read long and carefully by anyone who has the good idea of using a major daily as a basic reading text and a field from which to pick an anthology of writing models. The sleaziness of a first edition or mail run of a paper which has constituted itself an authority can be bothersome even to the newsstand purchaser, as well as annoying and misleading in a classroom--as was the 10 P.M. New York Times we used to get the following morning in New England, or read before midnight in New York. But classroom teachers will select later editions of papers they consider to be well written. And the establishing of regional editions of area-influential dailies and improved mechanical organization eliminates many of the annoyances caused by the pressroom's haste to keep up even with the news in regularly-scheduled, but early extras. More importantly, the teacher of language use does have to consider his text newspaper for that the main.

The influence of a newspaper on language depends upon how much of it is read and by how many subscribers throughout its large area. The paper's linguistic effect depends on what has to be studied intensively in order to be realized: first its "stylistics," ranging from punctuation use through syntax, choice of words, spelling, the tone resulting from all these and

there from its semantics (which I supposed includes its "editorial policy" or, in broadest definition, its politics).

Yet, the language which a newspaper provides as an ambience for its readers is neither wholly shaped nor strongly moved toward change and originality by the "Academy" of its copydesk. On the other hand, that desk exercises a conservative, attemptedly clarifying and logical influence on oral, official, trade and purely local usages. If newspaper stylebooks were more available or--one suspects--more often prepared and prescribed today, they would appear to uphold a written or "high falutin" standard closer to that of the current Emory and Pence grammar or the largely British-based grammar-of-English-for-Germans (now adopted in both Germanies) of Adolf Lamprecht than to the abdication of standards by business-and-schoolmen which makes all of us aware of a growing practices of Language Arts Despair. The New York Times--and, presumably, its news services and syndicated features--has somewhat reformed spelling since World War II, notably by reducing the doubling of L's in verb inflections and in regularizing the spelling of geographic names. But this has affected only the literate, who follow the Times and newswriting practice. Even though wire services for small radio stations spell out foreign names phonetically, those stations' announcers garble those same words in "look-see" reader fashion. Copy desks hold a strong line against using apostrophes merely for decoration or ~~in~~ against deviation from the authoritarian practice "fixed" somewhere in the 1820's. But printers who have been hastily proofread and publicists and letters-to-the-editor-writers and drama critics evade correction often on this point. "The desk" obviously strains to keep subjects and verbs in singular or plural agreement and even to follow the grammar book-enunciated rule (hardly descriptive of oral practice) that Americans consider collective nouns to be

singular, unless their constituents are acting separately. Even whom as an object of its own clause-verb and as for a verb-connector are retained by news editors, while they have disappeared from almost all speech on all levels. Newspapers do a more consistent job of following historical "ear tradition" for preposition use than do textbooks or philosophers or lawyers or political speechmakers. The copydesk is as intent on complete sentences as any fresh-theme "section person," with the stipulation that strongly understood verbs may be omitted--particularly in short headlines, when the verb is a "copulative" or understood to be repeated. Indeed, heads are not so often misunderstandable, from ambiguities of homomorphy, function shift and compression, as one might assume would result from the exigencies of character-count and the ringing of the pressroom bell.

Punctuation rules are granted by those "new grammarians" who insist on the vocal-descriptive determination of usage, since it reflects speech-Use's stress, juncture, even pitch. And I would claim it may help to determine them, among the literate. Copydesks are tending to use a comma before so alone as a conjunction (but thus is not a newspaperword). Otherwise, commas will precisely indicate short pauses for sense to the reader-out-loud. They may be omitted before coordinating conjunctions as unnecessary--certainly before and. Compact newswritten sentences avoid non-restrictive relative clauses. However, newspaper style does not incline toward nagging series of simple declarative Dick-and-Jane independent clauses, except in the most Hearstian and tabloidish of editorials. Braces of commas mark and clarify statements containing appositives or parentheses. There is little use of colon and semicolon--since there is an implicit standard that copy should be plainly readable (and that seems to have been invented before radio or television).

The two marks are not, however, confused. The principle of economy about comma use seems to me to afford a good enough model for understandable student writing. It gives no precedent for an indiscriminate punctuation indicating nothing oral or logical--certainly not that single comma before a verb separated from its subject which appears to be a remnant of something Victorian, left behind by some rural dame-school mistress in mittens. Initial participles are, I believe, discouraged by desks as loose, if not "Joe College," and as sounding like Bob and Ray's parodies of sports broadcasts; when a correspondent or special feature writer starts off with one, some one (maybe that same newsperson) puts in a comma, as he would after a clause or phrase. Newspaper tightness and clarity obviate the dangling and the absolute. "Hopefully" is something from a direct quotation and it has come under attack from the always-prescriptive columnists or staff writers when they have considered the social effects of language--from Washington, D.C. to Louisville to San Francisco, in my last summer's observation.

In what may be termed style-and-semantics, the copy-edited newspaper's playing educational and social reformist and, plainly, censorship roles showed up very clearly as expanded from analyses and summaries of the Watergate confessions and hearings. Since Orwell's 1984, we have been made strongly conscious that high-level learned and political jargons are ways of lieing by palliation and reversal. I would add--from a Faculty Lecture at Union of Kentucky of a year ago (before Watergate)--that the syntax or context of utterances may thicken a vague and muzzy and pretentious avoidance of truths, even in evasive prepositions like "as to," (seemingly, the only one any Senator or White House official knows) as well by passive and impersonal passive verbs, abstract nouns, non-sensory adjectives and euphemisms invented to fit a crime. The newspapers were on top of these devices as Watergate flowed across video

screens, realizing them either simultaneously or a little after the more alert viewers were laughing nastily at the questioners' and questionees' "at this point in time." While the papers were quoting the hearings literally, they necessarily did so in excerpt, reducing most of what was said to plain admissions or indications of crimes--and that before "backgrounder" articles or columns or editorial analyses. By June 24, the whole issue of immoral vocabulary as it leaks through our linguistic society had been dealt with in the Louisville Courier-Journal and Times by John Filiatreau in 'New-wrinkly' words fuzz our feeling, summed up in:

> "All these are examples of a new American language--a language of evasion. Scary."

Of course, "new" was journalistic exaggeration rising from some editors' shibboleth about "to be printable, it must have just happened or be going to happen." That same Sunday paper contained a Newsday feature by Arthur Herzog, apparently from his book on The B.S. Factor, which claimed that Watergate displayed some new styles of ubiquitous social lieing which have "filled the messageways and stores to overflowing."

Significantly, newspaper accounts try to, or are attemptedly edited to avoid false images, assumed value judgments, argument from instantaneous authority, a use of undefined terms. It is perhaps unfortunately true that there is less jargon of the metier or area slang in the news columns of standard dailies now than there was earlier in this century--say, before World War II. I am inclined to believe that most sports terminology was of newswriters' invention, since the athletic department had a license to be creative which in part resulted from the unwritten contract on some sheets that a reporter could grab pay for all the publicity he slipped into print. New sports terminology now

seems to come more from coaches--as in calling a rough or illegal play or player "physical" and inventing new terms for positions in a football lineup or for formations. "Game plan" from a President of the United States wandered from the assertions and predictions of a football coach to the assertions of a Chief Executive. The financial pages and fashion columns do, of course, continue generating terminologies from businesses; the reporters which add to them are part of those businesses. Cartoons do keep adding expressions to our language, from a kind of literacy invention of their own or literary working-up of "folk" materials, although the great days of Tad Dorgan are gone with that model, of whom Damon Runyan was a mere timorous copy, dialectically.

Trade papers continue to be written in their own dialects, which are almost entirely matters of terminology. Even Variety is not as spirited and inventive in this respect as in the 1920's, when Christopher Morley praised it in the Saturday Review of Literature and O. O. McIntyre plagiarized Variety quotations from Morley for a Broadway column written in a hotel room. The underground press which has lasted has shown a noticeable tendency to write more in straight news style and language--and was not terribly inventive to begin with. Its words for sex and narcotics did come from the streets and the crashout pads. Sex words are very old, as archetypal as Freud tried to be (I am not confusing him with Jung). Narcotics, or psychedelic talk is thin and repetitious, although it has made for the oral language some abominations, like "freak out," or some new applications, like "trip," which passed into the general language before Norman Mailer or other underground pressmen picked them up, while they were still claiming to be "underground."

The Black Press has not been trying to write in "Ghetto." The white press has reported, if with some scepticism, what proponents of Ghetto as a language claim is an African-based dialect (qua John Dillon) or an African-based speech

acquired by poor whites and other Southerners (qua Juanita Williamson). Notable Black writers who have printed 20th century Black speech--Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Imamu Baraka (born LeRoi Jones), Nikki Giovanni, Clarence Majors--have done so as a way of reporting on the downtrodden, not in propriis personis, as Robert Burns did of his Scots. Yiddish influence on English was originally oral, in the theatre and on streets and playgrounds, and has been very large in both speech and literature. Black phraseology, from jazz through the hipster, is not so palpable in general American talk, or in print.

Advertising surrounds the flow of news, through both our papers and through television. It is usually edited, or corrected, more so than are newspaper readers' Letters to the Editor. In teaching composition or reading by newspaper style, I would certainly contrast the vocabulary, use of idiom, assertiveness, tone resulting from style and bases of credibility in the news with those of the advertising columns. Dailies, presumably, do aid their customers to proofread advertising letterpress, but some advertisers must insist on an "as is" which gets into print innocent illiteracy as well as contrived, flatulent writing. Take this, from an accredited college of my southeastern Kentucky area (but not my institution), in the Cincinnati Post of July 14, 1973:

> "... The 1973-74 costs for a full-time student including Room, Board, Tuition and all normal fees is only $831 a semester... XXX was Conference...or District...Champions in Basketball, Baseball, Track, Cross-Country, Tennis, Golf and Judo."

Discriminated selections from the news and special feature sections of a newspaper you know thoroughly will give bases for instruction in reading and writing about the world in which we live, in its most current aspects and in the language of general use which, being specific, should be

clearest and of practical use, in and outside classrooms of all grades. As the lawyers and other governmental officials gabbling over Watergate have let us know, legal and other faculties have not been insisting upon knowledge of grammatical techniques and verbal choices for certificates of learning. One may largely blame the schools' insistence upon objective tests and the dropping of English standards and courses for this--rather than heed the AAUP's fatuous claim of last Spring that colleges have been neglecting morality in their classrooms. To neglect continued teaching of precisely-intentioned English speaking and writing--and using the writing as a disciplinarian, mirror and focus of both spoken and written thought is to allow students to pay no attention to the truth of what one is saying. And in reading newspapers, one should be aware that not all journalism curricula have been guiltless of the neglect of English composition. After their years of pre-college non-writing, reporters have for the last two decades demonstrated they could not spell or punctuate, never mind untangle their sentences. I have had the not uncommon experience of wondering, when I was at a State House publicity desk, where the experienced wire service and daily paper reporters were. Why were we having to train new kids who didn't ask the right questions, who got so much wrong, and who then so often handed in our releases blindly? An older AP man told me: "I'm tied down to a chair, writing up the stuff these jokers telephone!" Similarly, UPI in the past year had to hold a seminar for its major special reporters, showing them how to recognize, to structure and express their material.

That newspapers may very well be better first readers than the Dick and Jane and Spot books ever were, now that "look-see" is over and phonics are back in, I could easily affirm. The newspaper does not have the special and limited vocabulary of an elementary textbook or its limited, often idiotic

sentence-making. It is about the life which surrounds a pupil and it gives him a vision of words he knows, as well as the words and combinations of words at which his world's experience is always hinting. But one has to know what newspaper articles are doing and how they were prepared--even if the newspapers need to be examined with less care than our most theory-ridden, lately-fashionable textbooks.

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-10Newspapers: Handle with Care Frank Merchant

DISCUSSION SHEET

This presentation is intended to excite question, expansion, analysis and counter-presentation of experiences with the language of newspapers.

These preliminary remarks for the focus group do not include, but summarize notations of newspaper scanning from dailies of Cincinnati; Lexington, Ky.; Louisville; San Francisco; and Knoxville, Tenn. from early June to August 12th of this year. I added to this my own experience as a newspaperman, magazine writer and editor, publicity man and English writing teacher which goes back to 1927. Questions based on other reading of newspapers in other areas and more recently should throw light on my opinions and prejudices:

I--How do newspaper articles betray their origins as publishers' MUST stories; as reworked (or swallowed) publicity releases; as material which went over or through the gaps in a copy desk?

II--What peculiarities of style--vocabulary, syntax, tone--DON'Ts can be found in dailies? What is their effect on constant readers? (Here remember the Kansas City publisher who would not allow the word "snake" or any synonym therefore.)

III--What phraseology or slogans or epigrams are coming from what parts of newspapers read?--editorials, syndicated columns, cartoons? What trade jargon (as from business, women's page and fashion articles, sports, educational, science and political news sections)?

IV--What non-traditional uses in grammar and punctuation are observed, paper by paper? (Here note who-whom, shall-will, commas.) How useful or clear are these?

V--Can one classify or rank newspaper readers and non-newspaper readers among one's students? How?

VI--Has your school's journalism teacher any newspaper writing experience?

August 13, 1973